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LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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SUBJECT: CHAD: FIGHTING BREAKS OUT ON BORDER

REF: NDJAMENA 877

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Chadian rebels have taken up arms again, almost one year to the day that they seized and held Chad's eastern town of Abeche for 24 hours. Rebel groups UFDD and RFC claim that the Libyan-brokered peace agreement is not being honored; the Government of Chad points the finger at Sudan's meddling. Casualties from the clashes are high and the President is reported to be at the front directing the battle. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Rebel groups led by former Defense Minister Mahamat Nouri and Timan Erdimi have taken up arms again. The last week has seen three clashes between the rebel groups UFDD and RFC and the Chadian army (french acronym ANT). From November 24-25 an attack took place in Hadjer Hadid, about 75 kilometers from Abeche and in the vicinity of a cluster of Darfur refugee camps. On November 27-28 the conflict moved north near Am Zoer. As of November 29, a clash is taking place 70 kilometers from the town of Guereda. President Deby is believed to be at the front directing the battle. One of his nephews was killed in the first battle, which produced large casualties on both sides. Eyewitnesses reported that over 200 Chadian casualties were taken to hospitals in Abeche and N'Djamena. Battlefield deaths are harder to ascertain given the Muslim custom of burying the dead within 24 hours. Reporters invited by the Government to view the battlefield on November 26 saw evidence of heavy fighting and many destroyed vehicles.

¶2. (SBU) On November 25, the Government Spokesman, Moussa Doumgour, blamed the rebel groups for having unilaterally broken the peace agreement signed October 25 in Libya (reftel). The Government of Chad (GOC) also blamed Sudan (which according to the terms of the agreement was to have maintained the rebels on its territory until their disarmament) for having allowed the rebels to renew the hostilities. On November 28 Foreign Minister Allam-mi announced that they had evidence that Sudan was responsible for arming and equipping the rebels. For their part, the rebels have stated that the peace agreement was not being honored. They have also warned that any European force deployed on Chadian territory must remain strictly neutral or else it will be viewed as a "foreign occupying" force.

¶3. (SBU) The UN has restricted non-essential travel but has not evacuated any staff out of Abeche or the region. Humanitarian flights are continuing, but road travel between Abeche and Farchana has been restricted. Staff in Farchana are currently under lock-down until it is clear that the area is safe. Post canceled CODEL Meek's planned November 28 visit to Gaga camp (situated between Abeche and Farchana).

COMMENT:

14. (SBU) It is hard to assess how much impact the clashes will have on the stability of the regime. There is speculation that President Deby is at the front to ensure that this is indeed the rebel's last stand and to oversee the pulverization of the rebel forces. He stated at the signing of the Sirte agreement that he would go to war with an country backing rebels against his regime. Hot pursuit into Sudan is certainly likely; further steps remain to be seen.

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